The Jewish Discovery of Islam

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edited by
Martin Kramer

The Moshe Dayan Center
for Middle Eastern and African Studies
Tel Aviv University

Tel Aviv

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The Road from Mecca: Muhammad Asad (born Leopold Weiss)

Martin Kramer

In August 1954, there appeared in America a remarkable book, written by an author named Muhammad Asad and bearing the title *The Road to Mecca*. The book, a combination of memoir and travelogue, told the story of a convert to Islam who had crossed the spiritual deserts of Europe and the sand deserts of Arabia, on a trek that brought him ultimately to the oasis of Islamic belief. The book immediately won critical acclaim, most notably in the prestige press of New York, where it had been published by Simon and Schuster. One reviewer, writing in *The New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, called it an "intensely interesting and moving book."[1] Another reviewer, on the pages of *The New York Times*, placed the book in the pantheon of Arabian travel literature: "Not since Freya Stark," he wrote, "has anyone written so happily about Arabia as the Galician now known as Muhammad Asad."[2]

Muhammad Asad (1900–92) was a converted Jew, named Leopold Weiss at birth. He was no ordinary convert. Asad not only sought personal fulfillment in his adopted faith. He tried to affect the course of contemporary Islam, as an author, activist, diplomat, and translator of the Qur'an. Muhammad Asad died in February 1992 at the age of ninety-one, so that his career may be said to have paralleled the emergence of every trend in contemporary Islam.

As yet, however, there is no biography of Asad, and considerable obstacles await all who would attempt one. The most formidable of these is that the principal source for Asad's life remains Asad. No doubt this obstacle might be overcome, and this essay makes use of several additional sources for Asad's life. But the purpose here is more modest. It is to draw a very general sketch of Asad's life, and to place some emphasis upon the Jewish dimension of Muhammad Asad. For while Asad obviously distanced himself from Judaism, he adhered to a set of ideals that suffused the Jewish milieu from which he emerged. His failure to impart these ideals to contemporary Islam, and a repetitious pattern of rejection by his Muslim coreligionists, made of him a wandering Muslim, whose road from Mecca traversed an uncomprehending Islam before winding back to the refuge of the West.

The Drift from Judaism

Leopold Weiss was born on 12 July 1900, in the town of Lvov (Lemberg) in eastern Galicia, then a part of the Habsburg empire (Lvov is today in Ukraine). By the turn of the century, Jews formed a quarter to a third of the population of Lvov, a town inhabited mostly by Poles and Ukrainians. The Jewish community had grown and prospered over the previous century, expanding from commerce into industry and banking. Weiss's mother, Malka, was the daughter of a wealthy local banker, Menahem Mendel Feigenbaum. The family lived comfortably, and, wrote Weiss, lived for the children.[3]

From Weiss's own account, his roots in Judaism were deeper on his father's side. His paternal grandfather, Benjamin Weiss, had been one of a succession of Orthodox rabbis in Czernovitz in Bukovina. Weiss remembered his grandfather as a white-bearded man who loved chess, mathematics and astronomy, but who still held rabbinic learning in the highest regard, and so wished his son to enter the rabbinate. Weiss's father, Akiva, did study Talmud by day, but by night he secretly learned the curriculum of the humanistic *gymnasium*. Akiva Weiss eventually announced his open break from rabbinics, a rebellion that would presage his son's own very different break. But Akiva did not realize his dream of studying physics, because circumstances compelled him to take up the more practical profession of a barrister. He practiced first in Lvov, then in Vienna, where the Weiss family settled before the First World War.

Weiss testifies that his parents had little religious faith. For them, Judaism had become, in his words, "the wooden ritual of those who clung by habit—and only by habit—to their religious heritage." He later came to suspect that his father regarded all religion as outmoded superstition. But in deference to family tradition and to his grandfathers, young Leopold—"Poldi" to his family—was made to spend long hours with a tutor, studying the Hebrew Bible, Targum, Talmud, Mishna, and Gemarra. "By the age of thirteen," he attested, "I not only could read Hebrew with great fluency but also spoke it freely." He studied Targum "just as if I had been destined for a rabbinical career," and he could "discuss with a good deal of self-assurance the differences between the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds."[4]

Nonetheless, Weiss developed what he called "a supercilious feeling" toward the premises of Judaism. While he did not disagree with its moral precepts, it seemed to him that the God of the Hebrew Bible and Talmud "was unduly concerned with the ritual by means of which His worshippers were supposed to worship Him." Moreover, this God seemed "strangely preoccupied with the destinies of one particular nation, the Hebrews." Far from being the creator and sustainer of mankind, the God of the Hebrews appeared to be a tribal deity, "adjusting all creation to the requirements of a 'chosen people.'" Weiss's studies thus led him away from Judaism, although he later allowed that "they helped me understand the fundamental purpose of religion as such, whatever its form."[5]

But this early disillusionment with Judaism did not lead to the pursuit of spiritual alternatives. In 1918, Weiss entered the University of Vienna. Days were given to the study of art history; evenings were spent in cafés, listening to the disputations of Vienna's psychoanalysts. ("The stimulus of Freud's ideas was as intoxicating to me as potent wine.")[6] Nights were given to passions. ("I rather gloried, like so many others of my generation, in what was considered a 'rebellion against the hollow conventions.'")[7] But as his studies progressed, the prospect of a life in academe lost appeal. In 1920, Weiss defied his father's wishes and left Vienna for Berlin to seek a career in journalism. There he joined the *littérateurs* at the Café des Westens, sold a few film scripts, and landed a job with a news agency.

Eastern Exposure

In the midst of this fairly unremarkable climb, Leopold Weiss took an unexpected detour. Early in 1922, a maternal uncle, Dorian Feigenbaum, invited Weiss to visit Jerusalem. Dorian, a psychoanalyst and pupil of Freud's, had initiated Weiss to psychoanalysis a few years earlier in Vienna. Now he headed a mental institution in Jerusalem. Weiss accepted the invitation, arriving in Egypt by ship and then in Palestine by train. In Jerusalem, he lived in Dorian's house, situated inside the old city a few steps from the Jaffa Gate. It was from this base that Leopold Weiss would first explore the realities of Islam. But his exploration would be prefaced by another discovery, of the immoralities of Zionism.

This stand was not a family inheritance. Although Dorian did not consider himself a Zionist, Weiss had another uncle in Jerusalem who was very much an ardent Zionist. Aryeh Feigenbaum (1885–1981), an opthalmologist, had immigrated to Palestine in 1913, and became a leading authority on trachoma whose Jerusalem clinics were frequented by thousands of Arabs and Jews. In 1920, he founded the first Hebrew medical journal; from 1922, he headed the opthamological department at Hadassah Hospital.[8] Weiss later omitted all mention of his Zionist uncle from *The Road to Mecca*—one of many suggestive omissions, hinting that the distancing from family and Zionism were linked.

But Weiss always presented his anti-Zionism as a simple moral imperative. "I conceived from the outset a strong objection to Zionism," Weiss would later affirm. "I considered it immoral that immigrants, assisted by a foreign Great Power, should come from abroad with the avowed intention of attaining to majority in the country and thus to dispossess the people whose country it had been since time immemorial."[9] This moral position was bolstered by a flash of insight Weiss experienced near the Jaffa Gate while observing a bedouin Arab, "silhouetted against the silver-grey sky like a figure from an old legend." Perhaps, he fantasized, this was "one of that handful of young warriors who had accompanied young David on his flight from the dark jealousy of Saul, his king?" Then, he says, "I knew, with that clarity which sometimes bursts within us like lightening and lights up the world for the length of a heartbeat, that David and David's time, like Abraham and Abraham's time, were closer to their Arabian roots—and so to the beduin of to-day—than to the Jew of today, who claims to be their descendant."[10]

In Jerusalem, Weiss began to confront Zionist leaders with the Arab question at every turn. He raised it both with Menahem Ussishkin (1863–1941) and Chaim Weizmann (1874–1952), and soon gained a reputation as a sympathizer of the Arab cause. Weiss also credited a new friend with assisting him greatly in Jerusalem: the Dutch poet and journalist Jacob Israël de Haan (1881–1924). By this time, De Haan's strange career had already taken its many turns: he had gone from socialist agitator to religious mystic, from ardent Zionist to fervent anti-Zionist. The Haganah would assassinate De Haan in 1924. De Haan fed Weiss's rejection of Zionism with grist, and also helped Weiss find journalistic work. And it was through De Haan that Weiss met the Emir 'Abdallāh (1882–1951) in the summer of 1923—his first in a lifetime of meetings with Arab heads of state.

In Palestine, Weiss became a stringer for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, where he wrote against Zionism and for the cause of Muslim and Arab nationalism, with a strong anti-British bias. He published a small book on the subject in 1924,[11] and this so inspired the confidence of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* that it commissioned him to travel more widely still, to collect information for a full-scale book. Weiss made the trip, which lasted two years. At its outset, he found a new source of inspiration, during a stay in Cairo: Shaykh Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī (1881–1945), a brilliant reformist theologian who would later become rector of al-Azhar.[12] This was Weiss's first contact with Islamic reformism, and it left a profound impression upon him. Weiss concluded that the abysmal state of the Muslims could not be attributed to Islam, as its Western critics claimed, but to a misreading of Islam. When properly interpreted, in a modern light, Islam could lead Muslims forward, while offering spiritual sustenance that Judaism and Christianity had ceased to provide. Weiss spent the better part of the next two years travelling through Syria, Iraq, Kurdistan, Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, growing ever more fascinated by Islam in its myriad forms.

The Conversion

Upon concluding his travels, Weiss returned to Frankfurt to write his book. There he also married Elsa, a widow, "probably the finest representative of the pure 'Nordic' type I have ever encountered," a woman

fifteen years his senior, whom he had met before his last travels.[13] He was now settled into a comfortable routine. Yet he made no progress on his book: he was preoccupied and distracted, unable to put pen to paper in a summation of his travels. A quarrel with the editor of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* over his writer's block culminated in his resignation, and he moved to Berlin, where he took up Islamic studies and wrote as a stringer for lesser newspapers.

It was there, in September 1926, that Weiss experienced his second epiphany. He had had a flash of insight near the Jaffa Gate: the Arabs were the heirs of the biblical Hebrews, not the Jews. Now, on the Berlin subway, he had another flash. Watching the people on this train, in their finery and prosperity, he noticed that none smiled. Although positioned at the pinnacle of Western material achievement, they were unhappy. Returning to his flat, he cast a glance at a copy of the Qur'an he had been reading, and his eye settled upon the verse that reads: "You are obsessed by greed for more and more / Until you go down to your graves." And then later, in the same verse: "Nay, if you but knew it with the knowledge of certainty, / You would indeed see the hell you are in."[14] All doubt that the Qur'an was a God-inspired book vanished, wrote Weiss. He went to the leader of the Berlin Islamic Society, declared his adherence to Islam, and took the name Muhammad Asad.

Why the conversion? In 1934, Asad wrote that he had no satisfactory answer. He could not say which aspect of Islam appealed to him more than another, except that Islam seemed to him "harmoniously conceived... nothing is superfluous and nothing lacking, with the result of an absolute balance and solid composure." But he still found it difficult to analyze his motives. "After all, it was a matter of love; and love is composed of many things: of our desires and our loneliness, of our high aims and our shortcomings, of our strength and our weakness."[15] In the Feigenbaum family, it was more commonly thought that Asad's conversion stemmed from a hatred of his father, generalized to a contempt for the faith and people of his birth. Asad wrote to his father informing him of his conversion, but got no answer.

> Some months later my sister wrote, telling me that he considered me dead...Thereupon I sent him another letter, assuring him that my acceptance of Islam did not change anything in my attitude toward him or my love for him; that, on the contrary, Islam enjoined upon me to love and honour my parents above all other people... But this letter also remained unanswered.[16]

Asad's wife Elsa converted to Islam a few weeks later, and in January 1927 they left for Mecca, accompanied by Elsa's son from her previous marriage. On arrival, Weiss made his first pilgrimage; a moving passage at the end of *The Road to Mecca* describes his circumambulation of Ka'ba. Tragically, Elsa died nine days later, of a tropical disease, and her parents reclaimed her son a year later.

Asad of Arabia

So began Asad's Saudi period, which would form him as a Muslim. His six years in Saudi Arabia are recounted in *The Road to Mecca* in selective detail. Asad portrayed himself as a member of the inner circle of King Ibn Saud (1880–1953), dividing his time between religious study in Medina and palace politics in Riyadh. This intimacy with Ibn Saud can be confirmed in broad lines by an independent source. In late 1928, an Iraqi named 'Abdallāh Damlūjī, who had been an adviser to Ibn Saud, submitted a report to the British on "Bolshevik and Soviet penetration" of the Hijaz. It represents perhaps the most succinct confirmation of the role played by Asad in Saudi Arabia:

> Before concluding, I must bring attention to the person known as Asadullah von Weiss, formerly an Austrian Jew, now a Muslim, who resides presently near the holy shrine in Mecca. This Austrian Leopold von Weiss came to the Hijaz two years ago, claiming he had become a Muslim out of love for this religion and in pure belief in it. I do not know why, but his words were accepted without opposition, and he entered Mecca without impediment. He did so at a time when no one like him was allowed to do the same, the Hijaz government having recently passed a law providing that those like him must wait two years under surveillance, so that the government can be certain of their Islam before their entry into Mecca. Since that time, Leopold von Weiss has remained in Mecca, wandering the country and mixing with people of every class and with government persons. He then travelled to Medina, and stayed there and in its environs for several months. Then he was able—I have no idea how—to travel to Riyadh with King Ibn Saud last year, and he stayed in Riyadh for five months, seeing and hearing all that happened, mingling with the people and speaking with persons of the government. He does not seem to me to be a learned or professional man. His apparent purpose is to obtain news from the King, and especially from Shaykh

> Yūsuf Yāsīn, secretary to the King [and editor of the official newspaper *Umm al-Qurā*]. Asadullah uses this news to produce articles for some German and Austrian newspapers, in reply to the distasteful things written by some European newspapers on the Hijazi-Najdi court. This is the occupation of the Austrian Jew Leopold von Weiss, now Haj Asadullah the Muslim. What is the real mission which makes him endure the greatest discomforts and the worst conditions of life? On what basis rests the close intimacy between him and Shaykh Yūsuf Yāsīn? Is there some connection between von Weiss and the Bolshevik consulate in Jidda? These are mysteries about which it is difficult to know the truth.[17]

For British intelligence of the time, Bolshevism was an obsession, and Damlūjī's insinuation can be discounted. But from this account, it is clear that Asad did have exceptional access to the court of Ibn Saud. It is also clear that his status was not that of an adviser, but of a privileged observer, admitted to the court as part of the earliest Saudi efforts at public relations. Ibn Saud kept Asad close to him because this useful convert wrote flattering articles about him for various newspapers in continental Europe. (These newspapers, Asad wrote, "provide me with my livelihood.")[18]

According to Asad, he did finally become a secret agent of sorts: Ibn Saud employed him on a clandestine mission to Kuwait in 1929, to trace the funds and guns that were flowing to Fayṣal al-Dawīsh, a rebel against Ibn Saud's rule. Asad determined that Britain was behind the rebellion, and wrote so for the foreign papers, much to Ibn Saud's satisfaction.[19] Asad also began to settle down. He married twice in Saudi Arabia: first in 1928 to a woman from the Muṭayr tribe, and in 1930, following a divorce, to Munīra, from a branch of the Shammar. They established a household in Medina, and she bore him a son, Ṭalāl. Arabia was his home, so he worked to persuade himself: the Arabian sky was "my sky," the same sky that "vaulted over the long trek of my ancestors, those wandering herdsmen-warriors"—"that small beduin tribe of Hebrews."[20]

Arabia's sky enchanted Asad—but Arabia's ruler did not. Asad had shared the hope that Ibn Saud would "bring about a revival of the Islamic idea in its fullest sense." But as Ibn Saud consolidated his power, lamented Asad, "it became evident that Ibn Saud was no more than a king—a king aiming no higher than so many other autocratic Eastern rulers before him." Asad's indictment grew long, and he later made it public in *The Road to Mecca*. True, Ibn Saud had established order, but he did so "by harsh laws and punitive measures and not by inculcating in his people a

sense of civic responsibility." He had "done nothing to build up an equitable, progressive society." "He indulges and allows those around him to indulge in the most extravagant and senseless luxuries." He had "neglected the education even of his own sons and thus left them poorly equipped for the tasks that lie before them." And he was incapable of self-examination, while the "innumerable hangers-on who live off his bounty certainly do nothing to counteract this unfortunate tendency." Asad's final verdict was that Ibn Saud's life constituted a "tragic waste":

> Belying the tremendous promise of his younger years, when he appeared to be a dreamer of stirring dreams, he has broken—perhaps without realizing it himself—the spirit of a high-strung nation that had been wont to look up to him as to a God-sent leader. They had expected too much of him to bear the disappointment of their expectations with equanimity; and some of the best among the people of Najd now speak in bitter terms of what they consider a betrayal of their trust.

Ibn Saud, in sum, was "an eagle who never really took to wing," a king who never rose beyond "a benevolent tribal chieftain on an immensely enlarged scale."[21]

Disappointed with Ibn Saud, Asad commenced a quest for the ruler, state, or society which would embody his ideal Islam. He briefly pinned his hopes on the Sanusi movement in Cyrenaica:

> Like so many other Muslims, I had for years pinned my hopes on Ibn Saud as the potential leader of an Islamic revival; and now that these hopes had proved futile, I could see in the entire Muslim world only one movement that genuinely strove for the fulfilment of the ideal of an Islamic society: the Sanusi movement, now fighting a last-ditch battle for survival.[22]

According to Asad, he went on a secret mission to Cyrenaica on behalf of the Grand Sanusi, Sayyid Aḥmad (1873–1932), then in exile in Saudi Arabia, to transmit plans for continuing the anti-Italian struggle to the remnant of the Sanusi forces. But the mission, in January 1931, was a futile one: Italian forces crushed the last of the Sanusi resistance later that year.[23]

By this time, Asad had fallen from favor. He gave no explanation in *The Road to Mecca* for his break with Ibn Saud, except his personal disappointment with the monarch. But other explanations also gained cir-

culation. Some claimed that his last marriage proved his undoing: members of his wife's family were suspected of intrigues against Ibn Saud. Others pointed to his Jewish origins as a growing liability after 1929, when Arab-Jewish tensions in Palestine exploded in violence. What is certain is that he left Saudi Arabia in 1932, with the declared aim of travelling through India, Turkestan, China, and Indonesia.

Passage to India

Asad began with a "lecture tour" to India. According to British intelligence sources, Asad had linked up with an Amritsar activist, one Ismā'īl Ghaznavī, and intended to tour India "with a view to get into touch with all important workers." Asad arrived in Karachi by ship in June 1932, and left promptly for Amritsar.[24] There and in neighboring Lahore, he involved himself with the local community of Kashmiri Muslims, and in 1933 he made an appearance in Srinagar, where an intelligence report again had him spreading Bolshevik ideas.[25]

For Asad, the real attraction of Kashmir would have resided in its predicament as contested ground, where a British-backed maharaja ruled a discontented Muslim population. Beginning in 1931, Kashmiri Muslims in Punjab organized an extensive "agitation" in support of the Muslims in Kashmir. Hundreds of bands of Muslim volunteers crossed illegally from Punjab into Kashmir, and thousands were arrested. By early 1932, the disturbances had subsided, but the Kashmir government remained ever-wary.[26] Just what Asad did in Kashmir is uncertain. But on learning of his presence, the Kashmir government immediately wanted him "externed," although the police had no evidence to substantiate the intelligence report, and there appeared to be legal obstacles to "externing" a European national.[27]

With or without such prompting, Asad soon retreated from Kashmir to Lahore. There he met the poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (1876–1938), himself of Kashmiri descent, who persuaded Asad to remain in India and work "to elucidate the intellectual premises of the future Islamic state."[28] From this point forward, Asad would be a Muslim intellectual, thinking, lecturing and writing on Islamic culture and law.

In March 1934 he published a pamphlet entitled *Islam at the Crossroads,* his first venture into Islamic thought. This work can only be described as a diatribe against the materialism of the West—as Asad put it,

a case of "Islam *versus* Western civilization." Here Asad developed themes which would become widespread later in Islamic fundamentalist thought. Asad drew a straight line between the Crusades and modern imperialism, and held Western orientalists to blame for their distortions of Islam. This text went through repeated printings and editions in India and Pakistan. More importantly, however, it appeared in an Arabic translation in Beirut in 1946. Under the Arabic title *al-Islām 'alā mufṭariq al-ṭuruq*, it was published in numerous editions through the 1940s and 1950s. This translation had a crucial influence upon the early writings of the Islamist theoretician Sayyid Quṭb (1906–66), who drew extensively upon Asad in developing the idea of "Crusaderism."

In 1936, Asad found a new benefactor. The Nizam of Hyderabad had established a journal under his patronage entitled *Islamic Culture*, first edited by "Mohammed" Marmaduke Pickthall (1875–1936), a British convert to Islam.[29] Pickthall, best know for his English translation of the Qur'an, died in 1936, at which point Asad assumed the editorship of the journal. This placed Asad in touch with a wide range of orientalist and Indian Muslim scholarship, and he himself began to write scholarly pieces and translate texts.[30]

Intrusion of War

But another obligation began to assert itself—an obligation from the past. In *The Road to Mecca*, Asad wrote that his relationship with his father was resumed in 1935, after his father had come to "understand and appreciate the reasons for my conversion to Islam." Although they never met in person again, wrote Asad, they corresponded continuously until 1942.[31] However, Asad did return to Europe in the spring of 1939, with the intention of saving his endangered family. Nazi Germany annexed Austria in March 1938, enforcing the Nuremberg Laws in May. The life of Viennese Jewry became a succession of confiscations, persecutions, pogroms, and deportations. In October 1938, Asad resigned the editorship of *Islamic Culture*, and then left India. In April 1939, his Austrian passport was visaed in Vienna for entry to Britain and British India.[32] Afterwards he arrived in London, where he asked that this visa be extended: "I beg you to give me a prolongation of this visa till the end of this year as my parents will come in about 4 to 5 months. I have to settle many things for them."[33] ("Parents" was Asad's shorthand for his father and

stepmother; his own mother had died in 1919.) This evidence hints that Asad made an eleventh-hour attempt at rescuing his Jewish family before returning to India in the summer of 1939.

But whatever the scope of these efforts, they ended abruptly with the German invasion of Poland and the British declaration of war against Germany in September 1939. Asad was detained immediately in India as an enemy national, and he spent the next six years in internment camps with Germans, Austrians, and Italians who had been collected from all over British-ruled Asia. Asad's camp, he wrote, was peopled by "both Nazis and anti-Nazis as well as Fascists and anti-Fascists."[34] During his internment, he established contact with his uncle in Jerusalem, Aryeh Feigenbaum, who sent him food, clothes, and money.[35] Asad was only released in August 1945. By then, the worst had befallen his family in Europe: his father, stepmother, and a sister were deported from Vienna in 1942, and they perished in the camps.

Asad would never write of his long years of detention. He was the only Muslim in his camp, and it seems he deliberately detached himself from his surroundings and the war, by thinking only of the "cultural chaos" into which Muslims had been plunged. "I can still see myself pacing day-in and day-out over the great length of our barrack room," asking himself why Muslims had failed to reach an "unambiguously agreed-upon concept of the Law."[36] He would not allow Europe's war to become his war, or the suffering of the Jews to become his suffering, as he moved ever more resolutely to a consolidation of his Muslim identity.

Upon Asad's release, he wholly identified with the cause of Pakistan, which he saw not simply as a refuge, but as the framework for an ideal Islamic polity. In 1947, Asad became director of the Department of Islamic Reconstruction in the new state, and he gave himself over to formulating proposals for its constitution. Asad's purpose in these proposals is clear: it is to establish an Islamic state as a liberal, multiparty parliamentary democracy. In the 1930s and 1940s, the idea of the Islamic state, in the hands of many ideologues, had been presented as antithetical to democracy, and similar to the totalitarian states of central Europe. Asad's work challenged that trend, finding evidence in the Islamic sources for elections, parliamentary legislation, and political parties.

But his own proposals, published in March 1948 as *Islamic Constitution-Making*, were never implemented. "Only very few, if any, of my suggestions have been utilized in the (now abolished) Constitution of the

Islamic Republic of Pakistan; perhaps only in the Preamble, adopted by the Constituent Assembly in 1949, can an echo of those suggestions be found."[37] Pakistan, he later said, did not work out as Iqbal and he had hoped it would. The new state had been "an historical necessity," and without it, "Muslims would have been submerged in the much more developed and intellectually and economically stronger Hindu society." But "unfortunately it did not quite develop in the way we wanted it to. Iqbal's vision of Pakistan was quite different to that of Mohammed Ali Jinnah [1876–1948, first governor-general of Pakistan], who did not in the beginning want a separation."[38] Pakistan became a state for Muslims, but its mission as an Islamic state was put aside by its secular founders. In 1949, Asad left domestic politics to join Pakistan's foreign service, eventually rising to the position of head of the Middle East Division of the foreign ministry. His transformation was now complete, down to his Pakistani *achkan* and black fur cap. In the beginning of 1952, after twenty years of continuous residence in the subcontinent, he came to New York, as Pakistan's minister plenipotentiary to the United Nations.

The West Again

So began Asad's road back to the West—a choice that would bring him fame and sever his links to living Islam. He came to New York alone, without his wife and son, and lived in a penthouse in Manhattan, attended by a servant-driver.[39] He soon found a new love, a striking contrast to his Arabian wife of over twenty years: Pola "Hamida," an American woman of Polish Catholic descent who had converted to Islam. Asad's marriage to Munīra now came undone, and he married Pola Hamida before a civil judge in New York in November 1952. He would remain with her for the next forty years, and this marriage to a Western convert presaged his evolving preference for an ideal Islam, distinct from the born Muslims who practiced it.

For some months in New York, Asad also reestablished a tie to his family in Israel. At the time, Aryeh Feigenbaum's daughter, Hemdah (1916–87), was living in New York with her husband, Harry (Zvi) Zinder (1909–91), press officer at Israel's information office (and later director of the Voice of Israel). Zinder later told an Israeli journalist the story of how Asad would dine with him in out-of-the-way restaurants, or visit the Zinders' home in Forest Hills. Asad even attended the bar mitvah of the

Zinders' son, and the Zinders attended his marriage to Pola Hamida. Zinder reported the contents of his table talk with Asad back to Jerusalem. Asad, he noted, remained an unequivocal enemy of Israel, but it might be possible to soften his animosity, and it would be worth the effort, given Asad's solid standing in the Pakistani foreign ministry. According to Zinder, the Mossad responded by proposing that he try to recruit Asad for pay, a proposal Zinder rejected "with both hands." "I knew he would refuse any payment," said Zinder years later, "that he would be enraged by the idea, and that he would sever all contact with me." In time, the contact weakened anyway; according to Zinder, Pola Hamida disapproved of Asad maintaining close ties with his family in particular, and Jews in general. Still, according to Zinder, Asad continued for some years to correspond with Hemdah on family matters.[40]

There could be no doubt from Asad's writing, and from Zinder's testimony, that Asad remained a fervent anti-Zionist. Yet for many years, Asad left the systematic indictment of the modern-day state of Israel to others. In 1947 he was fully preoccupied with the partition of India, and offered no published comment on the partition of Palestine and the creation of Israel. In the years that followed the 1967 war, he spoke out more frequently, especially on Jerusalem. "We cannot ever reconcile ourselves to the view, so complacently accepted in the West, that Jerusalem is to be the capital of the State of Israel," he wrote. "In a conceivably free Palestine—a state in which Jews, Christians and Muslims could live side by side in full political and cultural equality—the *Muslim* community should be specifically entrusted with the custody of Jerusalem as a city open to all three communities."[41] But given the fever of anti-Israel passion in the Arab world after 1967, Asad's criticism could only be described as restrained. As Pakistan was far removed from the conflict, more would not have been expected of him.

But Asad failed to meet other Pakistani expectations. One of Asad's colleagues on the Pakistani delegation made a scandal of his romance with Pola Hamida, and Pakistan's prime minister, Khwaja Nizamuddin, reportedly reacted strongly against the marriage. At the end of 1952, Asad offered his resignation, in the expectation his position would be confirmed. To his surprise, his resignation was accepted. It was not a clean break, and when Nizamuddin fell from power in the spring of 1953, the prospect of Asad's return to Pakistani service seemed real. But no offer materialized, and Asad was now pressed for funds. Acting upon the advice of an American friend, he proposed to write his story for the New

York publisher Simon and Schuster, which offered him a contract and an advance.[42]

Asad thus began work on the book that would make him famous. *The Road to Mecca,* written in New York, appeared in 1954, and won widespread praise for its combination of spiritual searching and desert adventure. As a testimony of conversion to Islam, *The Road to Mecca* is still unsurpassed, and its continued republication in Western languages attests to its power, for both general readers and sympathizers of Islam. An example of its influence may be found in the testimony of a twenty-one-year-old American Jewish woman named Margaret Marcus (b. 1934). Asad's book found a place on the shelves of the public library in Mamaroneck, New York, near her home. Her parents would not let her take out the book, so she read it in the library over and over: "What he could do, I thought I could also do, only how much harder for a single woman than for a man! But I vowed to Allah that at the first opportunity, I would follow his example."[43] The young woman later converted to Islam, took the name Maryam Jameelah, and moved to Pakistan, where she became one of the best-known ideologues of Islamic fundamentalism, famous for her methodical indictments of the West.[44]

One Western convert, however, took a dim view of Asad's book: H. St. John ("Abdullah") Philby (1885–1960). Philby, too, had converted to Islam in 1930, assuming Asad's place as the convert in the court of Ibn Saud. He, too, had dabbled in exploration and politics, and he had strong views on Asad's attempts at both. In his review of *The Road to Mecca,* Philby accused "Herr Weiss" of "vagueness and unusual naiveté." According to Philby, Asad was no more than a journalist in search of a story, a man without any flair for geographical work or political analysis.

> His bazar scenes, religious festivals, desert sunsets, *et hoc genus omne* of local color suggest a patchwork of newspaper articles or cuttings strung together for a new[s] story, in which the *leit-motiv* is provided by his own gropings toward an emotional dénouement.

In his most damaging insinuation, Philby wrote that there was "no independent contemporary evidence" that Asad had undertaken "secret missions" for Ibn Saud or the Grand Sanusi.[45]

If the book's value as a record of politics and exploration was doubtful, then at least it served as a faithful personal memoir. Or did it? On

many points, noted Judd Teller (1912–72) in a review in *Commentary*, Asad had nothing to say on matters that demanded a say in the personal memoir of any European Jew. One of these was Asad's experience of Europe's anti-Semitism, nowhere mentioned by the author.

> Yet he was born in Galicia, where the Jews were caught up as scapegoats in the power struggles of the anti-Semitic Ukrainians and Poles and the dubiously tolerant Austrian government. He was brought up in Vienna, when it was the capital of European anti-Semitism. He left Berlin for his first visit to Palestine in the year when racist-nationalists assassinated Walter Rathenau. Did all this leave him untouched?[46]

Both Philby and Teller complained of the absence of another crucial point: Asad gave no reason for his decision to leave Arabia. (Teller speculated that it stemmed from heightened Jewish-Arab tensions in Palestine.) These criticisms suggested what is now obvious: *The Road to Mecca* cannot be read as a document of historical truth about Arabia, Ibn Saud, or even the author's life. It is an impressionistic self-portrait that suggests more than it tells. The face of its subject is in half-shadow.

But the omissions and elisions of the book did not detract from its commercial success. *The Road to Mecca* was translated from English into the major languages of Europe, and the royalties must have represented a windfall. The book also created demand for Asad's services as a lecturer, and his reputation in the West reached its pinnacle. But in Muslim lands, especially among Muslim activists, his choices raised troubling questions. The Pakistani ideologue Maulana Maududi (1903–79), in a letter written in 1961, expressed misgivings:

> I have great respect for [Asad's] exposition of Islamic ideas and especially his criticism of Western culture and its materialistic philosophies. I am sorry to say, however, that although in the early days of his conversion, he was a staunch, practicing Muslim, gradually he drifted close to the ways of the so-called "progressive" Muslim just like the "reformed" Jews. Recently his divorce from his Arab wife and marriage to a modern American girl hastened this process of deviation more definitely....Once a man begins to live the life of a true Muslim, all his capabilities lose their "market value." It is the same sad story with Muhammad Asad, who had always been accustomed to a high and modern standard of living and after embracing Islam, had to face the severest financial difficulties. As a result, he was forced to make one compromise after another.[47]

Asad, the critic of Western materialism, stood accused of succumbing to it; Asad, who first sought answers in Islam, now was suspected of questioning it. The disappointment Asad had come to feel for the actual practitioners of Islam had become mutual.

Translator of the Qur'an

Asad relocated to Geneva with Pola Hamida. There he began to contemplate a new project, ambitious in scope and significance: a new English translation of the Qur'an. Asad had not been satisfied with Marmaduke Pickthall's widely-used translation, since Pickthall's knowledge of Arabic had been "limited." As Asad later wrote:

> Familiarity with the bedouin speech of Central and Eastern Arabia—in addition, of course, to academic knowledge of classical Arabic—is the only way for a non-Arab of our time to achieve an intimate understanding of the diction of the Qur'an. And because none of the scholars who have previously translated the Qur'an into European languages has ever fulfilled this prerequisite, their translations have remained but distant, and faulty, echoes of its meaning and spirit.[48]

Asad began work on the translation in 1960. Such a large-scale project required the support of a patron, and he eventually appeared in the form of Saudi Arabia's King Faysal (r. 1964–75). Asad had known Faysal since 1927. He reestablished a link in 1951, when he paid his first visit to Saudi Arabia in eighteen years, and he nurtured the tie as Faysal began his ascent to the throne. Asad became one of Faysal's most fervent enthusiasts, seeing in him a vast improvement over Ibn Saud. "Whenever I reflect on the manner in which King Faysal rules over his realm," wrote Asad, "it appears to me as the fulfilment of every promise which the life of his father had held out and left open."[49] Still, Faysal was a dutiful son, and this praise could not cancel out Asad's stinging indictment of Ibn Saud, made in *The Road to Mecca*. As it happened, however, this obstacle was not insurmountable: in later editions of the book, Asad completely excised his enumeration of Ibn Saud's failings, replacing them with a few pages of banal ruminations on the desert.[50]

Faysal renewed Asad's Saudi patronage. In 1963, Faysal had the Muslim World League in Mecca subscribe in advance to Asad's planned

translation, which he began to compile in Switzerland. Asad published a limited edition of the first nine surahs in 1964. At about that time, he moved to Tangier, settling in a comfortable villa surrounded by cypress trees and bougainvillaea, where he worked to complete the translation. In 1980, he published the full translation and commentary in Gibraltar, under the title *The Message of the Qur'ān.*

Asad's translation opened with this dedication: "For people who think." The spirit of the translation is resolutely modernist, and Asad expressed his profound debt to the reformist commentator Muhammad 'Abduh (1849–1905). As another convert later wrote: "In its intellectual engagement with the text and in the intimate, subtle and profound understanding of the pure classical Arabic of the Koran, Asad's interpretation is of a power and intelligence without rival in English."[51] There are many English-speaking Muslims who will attest to the appeal of this translation, and who rely upon it daily.

But the translation created a controversy among some Muslim clerics who disputed Asad's modernist and allegorical interpretations of some verses. Critics accused him of denying the existence of angels, the permissibility of concubinage, and the bodily ascent of Jesus to heaven.[52] In private, there were those who insinuated that the translation reintroduced *isrā'īliyyāt,* "Jewish distortions" akin to those allegedly introduced by the first Jewish converts to Islam. In 1974, even before the translation was published in full, it was banned in Saudi Arabia.[53] Asad was left to finish the work on his own, supported financially by his friends. Fortunately, Asad had many, including Shaykh Aḥmad Zakī al-Yamanī (b. 1930), the Saudi minister of oil and natural resources and "my brother-in-spirit," to whom Asad devoted a collection of his essays a few years later.[54]

The rejection of his translation was only one sign of the growing climate of intolerance that further disillusioned Asad. "Khomeini is worse than the Shah," he told journalists after the Iranian revolution. "He has nothing in common with Islam."[55] According another journalist, Asad took a dim view of fundamentalist chaos, the intolerance of extremists, and the patter about "Islamic science" and "Islamic education." The Muslims, he opined, had been "low down for so many centuries that now they think they have to assert themselves by saying we are different. They are human beings. They are not different." In particular, he championed the rights of women and opposed the fundamentalist campaign for the *ḥijāb.* "Many people think that if you put a veil over a woman's face and

cover her, that is the way to Islam. It is not. In the time of the Prophet Muhammad, no *hijāb* existed except for the Prophet's wives and it is a wrong inference to say that this holds good for all Muslim women."[56]

His own early indictment of the West, *Islam at the Crossroads,* which found such an echo among fundamentalists, he himself came to regard as a "harsh book." Likewise, the once-powerful romance of the Arabs no longer held him in its grip. In 1981, he told a journalist that "it is possible that if I would come into contact with Arabs today for the first time, I would no longer be attracted by them."[57] Asad still remained enamored of Islam. Yet this ideal Islam was nowhere to be found in existing Islam, and could just as well be practised in Europe. It is said that Pakistan's president from 1978, General Zia ul-Haq (1924–88) tried to persuade Asad to return to Pakistan, but without result. In 1982, Asad left Tangier for Sintra, outside of Lisbon. He later moved to Mijas on the Costa del Sol in southern Spain. He remained articulate and lucid in interviews given as late as 1988.[58] In these last years, he reportedly began work on a sequel to *The Road to Mecca,* tentatively entitled *Homecoming of the Heart.* The title is said to have alluded to his contemplated return to Saudi Arabia at the invitation of Prince Salmān (b. 1936), governor of Riyadh and one of Ibn Saud's sons. It is not clear whether such a return was a realistic prospect, or whether the title hinted at a more spiritual homecoming. For Asad had neither completed this work nor returned to Arabia when he died in February 1992, at the age of 91. He was buried in the small Muslim cemetery in Granada.[59]

"Struck no root"

Few in the Muslim world took notice of Asad's passing. He had argued for a rational Islam; he had sought to reconcile Islamic teachings and democracy; he had tried to make the Qur'an speak to modern minds. His project, in fact, encapsulated ideals that drove the reform of Judaism, which by his parents' generation had largely served to ease Jews out of their faith altogether. Islam provided the last chance to achieve that ideal—the reform of a religion of law so that it could be made to live in a modern age, as a liberal force of continuing faith.

Unlike so many other Western converts to Islam, Asad chose also to live in Muslim societies, and worked to give Islam direction. But by advocating this reform, Asad remained a foreign body in contemporary

Islam, a transplant rejected time and again by his hosts. Saudi Arabia declined to keep him as a journalist; Pakistan, which he served as an official and diplomat, also broke with him; and the self-appointed guardians of Muslim orthodoxy shunned him as a Qur'an translator and commentator. Paradoxically, Asad won genuine acclaim in the West. There he found minds open to his ideas, and opportunities to publish and lecture. And there he ultimately found refuge from the late twentieth-century reality of Islam.

Asad's road to Mecca was the shorter journey, made headlong in the enthusiasm of youth. His road from Mecca was the longer journey, made painstakingly in an awareness of the contradiction between the promise of Islam and its contemporary practice—and his own equivocal position in it. For all Asad's fervor and belief, his Muslim answer never satisfied his Jewish question, put most poignantly by Asad to Asad: "Why is it that, even after finding my place among the people who believe in the things I myself have come to believe, I have struck no root?"[60]

Notes

1. S.C. Chew, review of *The Road to Mecca* in *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, 15 August 1954.
2. Robert Payne, review of *The Road to Mecca* in *New York Times*, 15 August 1954.
3. Details on the family in Lodewijk Brunt, "Een Jood in Arabie; over het leven van Muhammad Asad," in *Neveh Ya'akov: Jubilee Volume Presented to Dr. Jaap Meijer on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, eds. Lea Dasberg and Jonathan N. Cohen (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1982), 182.
4. Muhammad Asad, *The Road to Mecca* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), 55.
5. Ibid., 55–56.
6. Ibid., 58–59.
7. Ibid., 60.
8. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. "Feigenbaum, Aryeh"; Haviv Kena'an, "Prof. A. Feigenbaum—Hasid ha-dugmah ha-ishit," *Ha'aretz*, 7 August 1964. The omission is all the more striking in that, at one point in *The Road to Mecca*, Asad writes that the eyes of Jerusalem's Arabs "seemed to remain clear and untouched by age—unless they happened to be affected by trachoma, that evil 'Egyptian' eye disease which is the curse of all countries east of the Mediterranean." *Road to Mecca*, 92.
9. Asad, *Road to Mecca*, 93.

10. Ibid, 91.
11. Leopold Weiss, *Unromantisches Morgenland; aus dem tagebuch einer reise* (Frankfurt: Frankfurter societäts-drukerei, 1924). The book is summarized by Wolf Kaiser, *Palästina—Erez Israel: Deutschsprachige Reisebeschreibungen jüdischer Autoren von der Jahrhundertwende bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1992), 267–83. Kaiser also discusses some of the contemporary criticism of reviewers. Asad wrote of his book that, "although its anti-Zionist attitude and unusual predilection for the Arabs caused something of a flutter in the German press, I am afraid it did not sell very well." Asad, *Road to Mecca*, 185.
12. Asad, *Road to Mecca*, 188.
13. Ibid., 142.
14. Qur'an, 102 (Sūrat al-Takāthur). The translation is Asad's.
15. Muhammad Asad, *Islam at the Crossroads* (1934; reprint, Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashaf, 1991), 4.
16. Asad, *Road to Mecca*, 311.
17. Arabic report (with translation) by Dr. Abdullah Damluji, no date, included in despatch from Political Secretary of High Commissioner for Iraq (Baghdad) to Consul (Jiddah), 18 December 1928, Public Records Office (London), FO967/22. Damlūjī had left Ibn Saud's service in September 1928 and returned to Iraq.
18. Asad, *Road to Mecca*, 48.
19. Ibid., chap. viii, "Jinns." On the Dawīsh affair, see Joseph Kostiner, *The Making of Saudi Arabia 1916–1936* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 117–40.
20. Asad, *Road to Mecca*, 49.
21. Ibid., 177–81, for these assessments of Ibn Saud.
22. Ibid, 325.
23. Ibid., chap. xi, "Jihad."
24. "History sheet of Herr Leopold Weiss Alias Mohmmad Asad Ullah Vyce. An Austrian Convert to Mohammadanism," prepared by the Intelligence Bureau of the Government of India, included in letter from E.J.D. Colvin, Political Secretary, His Highness' Government Jammu and Kashmir (Jammu) to Lieut.-Col. L.E. Lang, Resident in Kashmir (Sialkot), 30 January 1934, India Office Records, R/1/1/4670. In *The Road to Mecca*, Asad dates his last Arabian journey to the late summer of 1932, which would place his final arrival in India at a date later than June.
25. C.I.D. report of 20 November 1933, India Office Records, R/1/1/4670.
26. On the Kashmir "agitation" of 1931–32, see David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 96–99.
27. Lieut-Col. L.E. Lang, Resident in Kashmir (Sialkot) to B. J. Glancy, Political Secretary, Government of India, Foreign and Political Department (New

Delhi), 31 January 1934, India Office Records, R/1/1/4670.

28. Asad, *Road to Mecca*, 2.
29. On the journal, see Peter Clark, *Marmaduke Pickthall: British Muslim* (London: Quartet Books, 1986), 61–62.
30. For a sample of his work, see his article "Towards a Resurrection of Thought," *Islamic Culture* (Hyderabad) 11 (1937): 7–16.
31. Asad, *Road to Mecca*, 311 n.
32. India Office Records, L/P&J/7/2678. This includes an extract, from Weiss's passport, of a visa for the United Kingdom and British India, granted at Vienna and issued on 24 April 1939. The authorization for the visa came directly from the Government of India in New Delhi, 9 February 1939.
33. Weiss, undated note to India Office in London, received at India Office on 8 June 1939; India Office Records, L/P&J/7/2678. Weiss gave his London address as 119, Old Church Street, Chelsea, S.W. 3.
34. Muhammad Asad, *This Law of Ours and Other Essays* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1987), 1.
35. Yossi Melman, "Goralo ha-Yehudi shel Muhammad Asad," *Ha'aretz*, 21 April 1989.
36. Asad, *This Law of Ours*, 1.
37. Muhammad Asad, *The Principles of State and Government in Islam* (new ed.; Gilbraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980), xi. This book built upon his *Islamic Constitution-Making*.
38. Mushtak Parker, "Death of a Muslim Mentor," *Middle East*, May 1992, 29.
39. Melman, "Goralo ha-Yehudi," quoting a despatch by Harry Zinder.
40. Ibid., quoting a despatch by Harry Zinder.
41. Asad, *This Law of Ours*, 169, 173.
42. Harry Zinder (New York) to Abba Eban, 30 April 1953, Israel State Archives, ISA/R693/Box 96, File 14.
43. Maryam Jameelah, *Memoirs of Childhood and Youth in America (1945–1962)* (Lahore: Muhammad Yusuf Khan, 1989), 109.
44. *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, s.v. "Jameelah, Maryam."
45. H. St. John B. Philby, review of *The Road to Mecca*, in *Middle East Journal* 9 (winter 1955): 81–82.
46. Judd Teller, review of *The Road to Mecca*, in *Commentary* 18 (September 1954): 280.
47. Maududi (Lahore) to Margaret Marcus [Maryam Jameelah], 25 February 1961, in Maryam Jameelah, *Correspondence between Maulana Maudoodi and Maryam Jameelah* (Delhi: Crescent Publishing, 1969), 15.
48. *The Message of the Qur'ân, Translated and Explained by Muhammad Asad* (Gilbraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980), iv–v.

49. From the 1973 postscript to the 4th rev. ed. of *The Road to Mecca* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus), 378.
50. Cf. 177–81 of the original 1954 ed. with 177–81 of the 4th rev. ed. of 1980.
51. Parker, "Death of a Muslim Mentor," 28–29.
52. Asad dealt with all these accusations in *Arabia, The Islamic World Review* (October 1981), 4.
53. Reinhard Schulze, *Islamischer Internationalismus im 20. Jahrhundert* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 334 n. 59.
54. Asad, *This Law of Ours*, dedication page.
55. Quoted by Lisbeth Rocher and Fatima Cherqaoui, *D'une foi l'autre: Les conversions à l'Islam en Occident* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 64.
56. Mushtak Parker, "Death of a Muslim Mentor."
57. Malise Ruthven, "Muhammad Asad, Ambassador of Islam," *Arabia: The Islamic World Review* (September 1981): 60, 62.
58. See the video "A Tribute to Muhammad Asad," filmed in 1988 and distributed by Islamic Publications International of Teaneck, New Jersey.
59. Details on these last years are provided by Mushtak Parker, "Death of a Muslim Mentor."
60. Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 47.